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EXAMINING THE ROLE OF MULTIMEDIA JOURNALISM IN INFLUENCING THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION

Steffi Romero

INTRODUCTION

Trinidad is the southernmost island in the Caribbean archipelago and sits about 11 kilometers north of the coast of Venezuela. Trinidad falls into the Caribbean territory, thus, serves as a member state of the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM). In the context of the region, the average poverty rate for the Caribbean is approximately 30%, according to International Journal of Social Welfare (Bowen, 2007). Some countries tend to be scoring higher than others while countries like Haiti continuously score in with the highest poverty rates due to a history of political instability and corruption (Bowen, 2007). On an individual level, Trinidad is one of the strongest when speaking of natural resources like asphalt, oil and gas with oil and gas as the main exports, yet the World Bank suggests that the island struggles with high poverty rates (Bowen, 2007). There are levels of disparity that exist in multiple sectors, one being in the area of education.

In September 2016, the United Nations announced that goal four of its Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning (Slade, 2017, February 22). Many developing nations have implemented strategies to ensure that this goal is met and some governments have even gone on to completely change the face of education in their countries. In Trinidad, a unique situation exists in which there are distinct historical factors that have shaped and continue to

influence the education system. Some would argue that though the history of education in Trinidad has contributed to the success of the nation in the present day, it has also fed into the disparity which exists between the rural and urban areas. The idea here is that certain mentalities or perceptions of some communities are more integrated and essential while others experience isolation and lack of engagement. This occurs on a national level and is perpetuated by entities, like the media.

In the context of the responsibility of the media, multimedia journalism plays a crucial role in providing the forum for discussion and debate concerning national interests so that all parties are well-informed, which in itself is a contribution to quality education because people are actively involved in decision making and drafting possible ideas to help issues of injustices like poverty (Khan, Khan, & Amosa, 2011). When there is a lack of involvement, people are not engaged with their own affairs or with the affairs of the nation, which initially creates a sense of disparity since this disengagement is closely tied to a lack of education and influence in decision making.

An example of this can be seen in Toco where a concerned parent of a student of the Toco Secondary School suggested that the media has neglected to provide proper coverage and share effective information with the people of Toco, thus hindering the everyday activities of life for people who live a rather secluded life (Williams, 2018, October 3). In terms of how this pertains to education, the attendance rate in schools have

seen a decline over the years and there is no sense of motivation or encouragement for students who do well, hence, the entire value and attitude that is placed on education is not prioritized (Williams, 2018, October 3). The media has an extremely vital role to play in poverty eradication, which is building a platform for a higher value placed on education, resulting in a higher level of quality education through increased performance, attendance and infrastructure in Toco, Trinidad.

Conclusively, the research supporting this article is unique from other studies conducted on poverty because it gives more insight into the specific community of Toco, Trinidad while it assesses more than one pillar of social justice. The results that were generated from this research were used in the creation of a virtual blog page designed for Toco, Trinidad to address the absence of the media, specifically in covering those areas such as current affairs and history through multimedia elements. It aimed to give the community the opportunity to influence the spread of accurate information and exchange of ideas within the community which feeds into the initial goal that the media should meet; facilitating education and encouraging engagement on all levels.

METHODOLOGY

To assess the impact that poverty has on the media's role in Toco, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was ethically used to collect data. The target population of this research was any individual over the age of 18 years old who had a connection to the Toco community. This population was chosen because of its accessibility and ability to provide the data required for this study and also because of its relevance to the topic being researched. To cater to this target population, a series of surveys, formal and informal interviews were used. There were 4 formal interviews conducted along with 10 respondents who completed the questionnaire.

The primary qualitative methods used consist of a series of formal and informal interviews. This research used qualitative methods to allow for a more descriptive understanding of the experiences of community members in Toco. Informal interviews were conducted through phone conversations with teachers, parents and students who reside in Toco and were instrumental in providing description through observing intonation and emotional response of subjects. One secondary source that was used were newspaper articles from Trinidad's three national newspapers. These articles gave good insight into not only the media's perspective of the community but shows the extent to which journalism can or may provide biases which is key for understanding the shortcomings of national multimedia journalism.

The main primary quantitative method that was used was a questionnaire which was completed online without the presence of a teacher or parent in order to avoid any instances of persuasion or emotional response out of guilt or fear of being judged based on responses, hence, these responses were confidential. Respondents did not state their name for privacy purposes. The content of the questionnaire was structured in a series of multiple choice questions, rank order questions, Likert-type scales, rating scale and open ended responses. The secondary sources were various reports and statistics from UNICEF and the United Nations concerning global poverty and education. The main objective in using secondary quantitative data is to identify and examine trends among certain characteristics of people who live in poverty, such as gender, number of people living in the household, and geographic location.

RESULTS

The first part of the questionnaire sought to examine the effects of poverty on the functionality of the Toco Secondary School in terms of tangible

facilities, non-tangible resources such as digital technology and other abstract factors like the importance that is placed on education in Toco. When asked to rate the level at which respondents agree with certain statements listed in question #8, about half the respondents strongly agreed with the statement. The other half disagreed due to issues like fear of shame or even the possibility that those respondents live in a different social bracket and can afford university education.

Question #9 was also one of the questions with a high response rate as respondents were asked

to choose the resources that are lacking in the Toco Secondary School. Approximately 60% of respondents chose the 'all of above' response while the remaining 40% were distributed amongst the other responses. Meanwhile, the 'none of the above' response received a 0% response in which no respondents chose that option. Figure 1 below shows gives a graphical representation of the responses collected for this question.

Resources that The Toco Secondary School Lacks

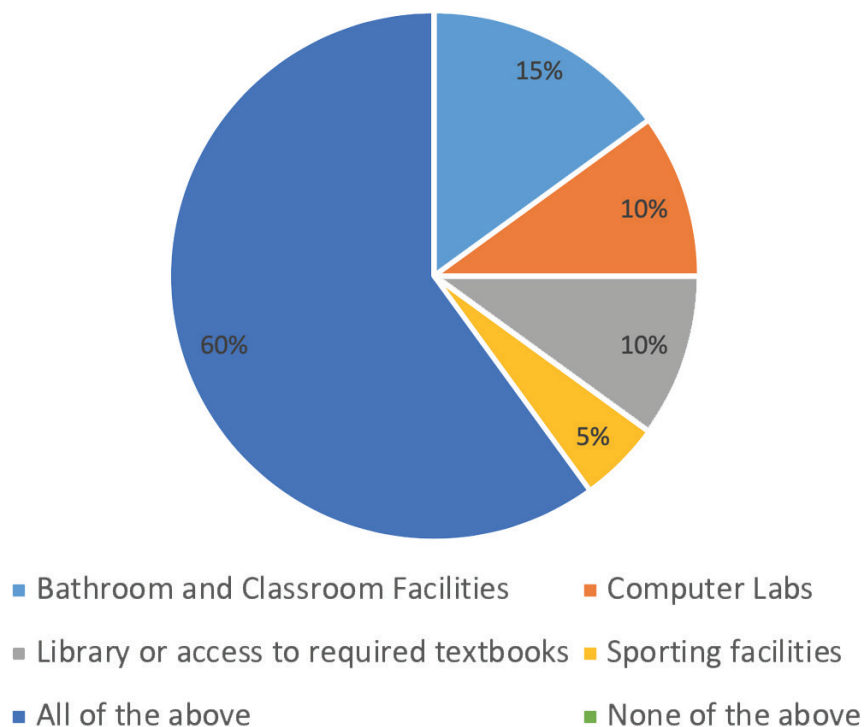


Figure 1. Resources that the Toco Secondary School Lacks

One of the objectives of this research is to determine the impact of multimedia journalism in influencing quality education in Toco. Questionnaire #10 in the questionnaire was aimed at examining what respondents think is the link between media and education. When asked to determine the level of agreements to a set list of statements, 40% of respondents strongly agree that students who have access to computers and lab facilities do better in school. An additional 20% is responded that the government should ensure that there is a computer lab in every secondary school in Trinidad. The remainder of the population was evenly distributed amongst the

remaining responses. One can acknowledge from this result that there is a commonality in which respondents agree that labs are necessary for the students to succeed.

Another telling question asked respondents to rate their level of agreement to the statements listed, based on sources surrounding the presence of media in rural areas as contextual evidence. Approximately 60% of respondents strongly disagree that the media does a good job at highlighting community events in Toco. Figure 2 highlights the responses from this question.

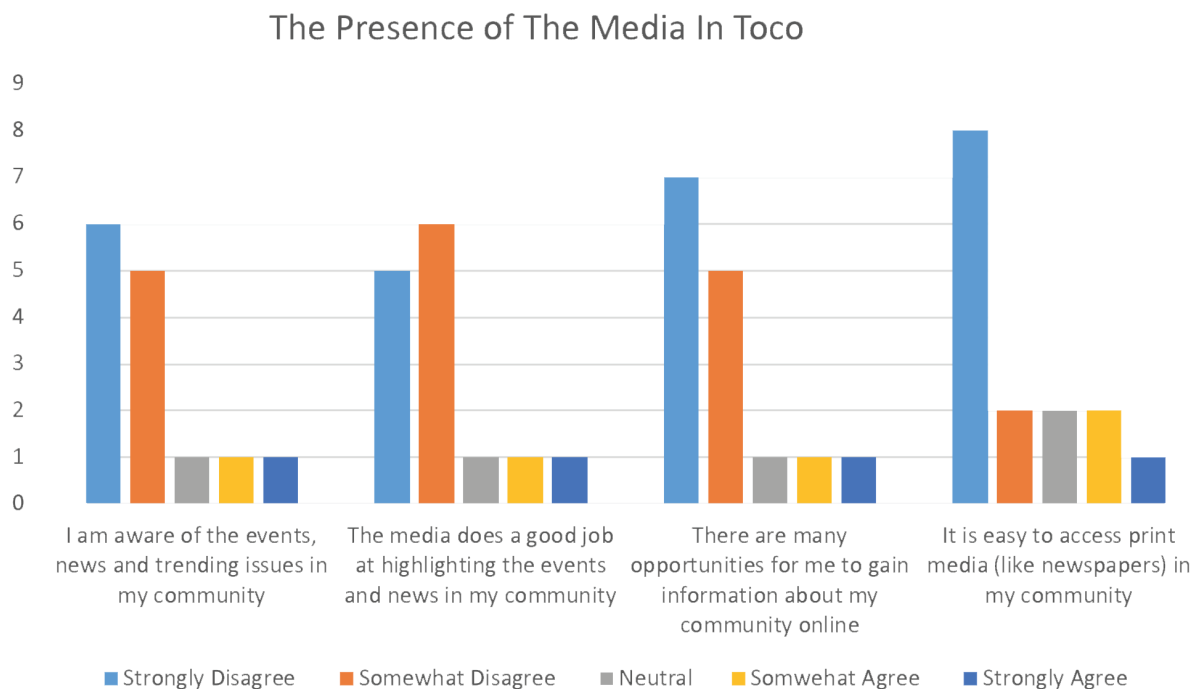


Figure 2. The Presence of the Media in Toco

Another question which was analyzed is question #7 in the questionnaire which asked participants whether or not they think the media should have

more of a presence in Toco. A majority (60%) of respondents responded 'yes'. Figure 3 provides a visual representation of the responses obtained.

Should The Media Be More Present in Toco?

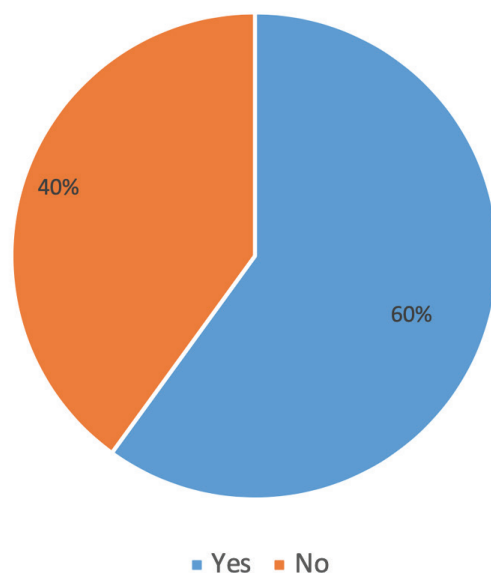


Figure 3. *Should the Media Be More Present in Toco?*

DISCUSSION

The results from the questions asked on poverty indicate that the residents of Toco highlight a lack of economic resources (such as infrastructure and funding) as one of the main issues which is present in their community. The thesis of this research suggests that communities that are rural and further away from main cities usually deal with the effects of being economically isolated and somewhat ‘forgotten’ about by governments and other entities. This is an indicator as to why the presence of the media may be lacking and/or very limited in Toco, since there is an obvious detachment between what the community needs or wants and the reality of what is received from the government in terms of financial investment. A tangible example of this can be seen in examining the radio station that once existed in Toco but had to be shut down due to financial strain and the inability of the private sector to sustain such a service that was essential to the community. This is an example of how poverty can hinder the media

from fully covering a community and how poverty can cause a community to lack information and miss out on opportunities that may be seen as normal or common for other urban or developed areas.

Secondly, in examining the value and commitment that is placed on education in the community of Toco, it can be suggested that even though a formal education is valued, there are barriers which prevent individuals from being able to move from one level of education to the next. One of the obvious barriers is poverty, however, another barrier may be a lack of motivation or some sense of detachment on an individual level to the point at which students, teachers or parents experience a sense of self-doubt. One factor that might feed into this point, according to the data collected, is that the media lacks a presence in Toco and the community members are not engaged in the process of creating content, and then sharing that content. This, in turn, means there is a lack of

interaction and engagement, leading to a sense of psychological demotivation.

The question then becomes: what should be done? According to surveys conducted which asked the community members to give feedback on what the next steps should be to create a greater media presence, the majority indicated that the news and information they receive should be heavily focused on development in Toco and should be more personally applicable to each member of the community. This suggests that there is a desire to break away from the sense of isolation and to become involved in the creation of content that is relevant and useful to the people of this community. In response to this desire, a specific project was implemented that took the form of a digital blog post which highlights current and upcoming events, community highlights and trending news of what is going on in and around the community. The decision to turn to a digital forum came about in response to the concern that printing a physical newspaper requires money and is time consuming, whereas, a digital forum allows for information to be spread quickly in a more innovative way that feeds into participation and engagement.

The idea here is that once people are informed and encouraged to aid in the production of this blog post or even see their work and content displayed online, it will cause a more integrated approach to education as the community now is able to participate in the information exchange process. This is important to break those mindsets of detachment and demotivation while it encourages a sense of community pride where people are aware that their work is being highlighted. The digital forum uses bright colors, images and text to share content while providing a forum for feedback so that people can offer suggestions and opinions of what should be added or taken away in order to accurately capture the input of the community. The hope is that through this engagement, the community will be more connected with national and regional issues while

gaining the ownership and pride over their own news and affairs.

This research highlights the role that multimedia journalism plays in influencing the quality of education in a specific community, Toco. The key point is that education provides the platform for awareness and engagement to take place in communities, however, factors such as poverty can hinder the role that multimedia journalism plays in certain rural areas in developing nations.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steffi Romero is an international student from Trinidad who graduated in 2019 from St. John's University with a major in Advertising Communications and with a minor in Social Justice. Her research interests include studying the effects of poverty and the institution of education in developing nations. Steffi graduated as an Ozanam Scholar of St. John's University and spent her university career as a diligent server and defender of social justice. She has worked with

organizations such as the Daughters of Charity at the United Nations where she used her skill and knowledge in media to contribute to the events and mission of the organization. She also spent 4 years serving as a volunteer at St. John's Bread and Life in Brooklyn, New York where she was deeply touched by the lives of the people she interacted with. She is a global citizen and has travelled to countries like Ghana, Ecuador, Italy and France, where she immersed herself in service, cultural exchange and research. After graduation, she returned home, Trinidad, where she dived straight into the world of work and still maintains her passion for servanthood and leadership. She is committed to finding ways of integrating her academic interests with research and service, as she has learned during her time as an Ozanam Scholar. Steffi believes that she is a catalyst to do what must be done, even in the most challenging times.